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TAGS: PREL KDEM FR IZ UN

SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA EMPHASIZES THAT IRAQ'S PROBLEMS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY POLITICAL, NOT ECONOMIC OR SECURITY, IN NATURE

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (U) Action request at para 7.

¶2. (C) At the end of a January 25 briefing by visiting Washington analysts on transition/security issues in Iraq, French MFA DAS-equivalent for Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf Franck Gellet expanded on French reluctance to host the next meeting on the Iraq Compact (ICI). Gellet stated that the GOF had earlier in the week (he thought it might have been January 21 or 22) responded to the UN Special Representative for Iraq Staffan de Mistura via French Permrep Ripert. This was reportedly in response to de Mistura's proposal that France host the next ICI meeting and consider linking it to a separate conference France would also host on national reconciliation that would involve representatives of all Iraqi factions. Gellet said that such a proposal made no sense on its face, in part because the participants in a conference on national reconciliation would involve many more participants than would be at a Compact meeting.

¶3. (C) Gellet emphasized that France's main problem with ICI is its economic focus. The issues preventing peace and reconstruction in Iraq are not related to economic resources (which are abundant) or even security (which affects many other activities but has recently improved in many parts of the country). The signal failure in Iraq, in France's view, is the lack of progress in achieving national reconciliation.

For the compact to be relevant to Iraq's needs, Gellet argued, it needs to be more "politically oriented."

¶4. (C) When pressed on the form a French-sponsored national reconciliation conference might take, Gellet referred to the 2004 Cairo conference that brought contending Iraqi factions together as a viable framework. That conference, he claimed, allowed for participation by all factions, parties, and movements, including ex-Ba'thists. He recalled that most participants found the gathering useful and blamed the failure to follow through on U.S. uneasiness with the call for the withdrawal of foreign military forces as quickly as possible. The situation is now quite different, Gellet continued, inasmuch as all parties agree that U.S. troops can and should remain present for the time being as an interposition force preventing a breakdown into total civil war. The GOF's view is that the time is ripe for a new effort to convene a conference. France has offered to host it but does not insist on doing so if the Iraqis would prefer someone else do so. When asked what France has done to pursue an initiative that Gellet acknowledged had passed almost unnoticed since Kouchner formally proposed it in Istanbul last November, Gellet answered that it was waiting for the Iraqis to signal a desire to go forward.

¶5. (C) We stressed that we had no instructions to comment on French ideas regarding a national reconciliation

conference. We nevertheless noted that Washington skepticism is probably fueled by the failure of this past summer's intra-Lebanese conference in Selle St. Cloud to avert a presidential vacuum in Lebanon or overcome deep political differences among its leaders. We added, however, that we were open to further discussion of what was needed to advance national reconciliation, as evidenced by S/I Satterfield's discussions in Paris last month. Further discussion here or in Washington with Satterfield and/or other officials about how best to promote national reconciliation as well as the ICI seemed called for; Gellet readily agreed.

¶6. (C) In addition to Gellet, French interministerial coordinator for Iraqi reconstruction Xavier Roze, former French ambassador to Eritrea Gerard Sambrana (on his way out to become de Mistura's political adviser), and Iraq desk officer Olivier Masseret attended the briefing. Their questions and ensuing discussion highlighted French uncertainty that recent improvements in Iraq's security situation would translate into durable progress toward national reconciliation and political stability. Among the key points:

--Sunni Arab/Kurdish tensions in the north posed a constant threat to stability in that region. Sunni Arabs fear being pushed into a "sea of sand" with no resources. Although France tries to calm the Kurds down and to warn them not to press matters to the breaking point, Gellet argued that we needed to work together to contain the situation. This could include delaying as long as possible any referendum on Kirkuk to reduce the Kurds' "obsession" over its status. Within Kurdistan, the French notice a growing rift between older generation leaders, who prefer greater autonomy or outright independence, and younger Kurds who prefer staying within Iraq partly to fend off the Turks and reap economic benefits

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of national unity. Continued Sunni Arab/Kurdish tensions, if not carefully managed, carry the ongoing risk of sparking civil war.

--The French were very interested in USG assessments of the long-term viability of "awakening councils" in Sunni Arab areas and whether they might become real political movements or parties that would challenge existing leaders. They also asked about the risk, as al-Qa'ida in Iraq was beaten back, of armed Sunni Arab irregulars turning on coalition troops. The French wondered as well whether Sunni Arabs prominent in the awakening councils shared traditional Sunni attachment to preserving Iraq's national unity.

--In the south, the French asked who inhabitants there think controls Iraq's oil resources, Iran's role and intentions in the region, and the majority view of possible creation of a Shi'a state or broadly autonomous region.

--Throughout the country, the French wanted an overall assessment of political transition and its implications for the U.S. presence in Iraq. Similarly, did the population and local leaderships accept provincial councils as permanent fixtures on the Iraqi political landscape? As a segue into his points about the Iraq Compact and national reconciliation, Gellet stated that France was not generally optimistic about political trends despite positive security developments. (Note: Gellet added that France does not say this publicly so as not to undermine the situation. End note) This explains why France regards Iraq's most important problems as political in nature and emphasizes seeking political solutions over giving first priority to treating Iraq's economic and security ills.

¶7. (C) Comment and action request: We continue to wait for the GOF's formal response to S/I Satterfield's paper, which we understand will be further delayed pending all the necessary political approvals. This exchange, however, gave us a much needed opportunity to enter into a detailed

exchange of how we each perceive various aspects of the situation on the ground in Iraq. Gelle's further explanation of France's reluctance to associate itself closely with the Compact (including hosting a follow-up conference) and its conception of how best to spur progress on national reconciliation seem to merit further high-level discussion. We would encourage S/I Satterfield to engage further with the French on these subjects either here or in Washington at his earliest opportunity.

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